

## **A Study in Scripture and Art: An Introduction to Advent**

### ***The View From the Mountain***

#### **Introduction**

The four weeks of Advent prepare us for the birth of Christ. The season prompts us to reflect on the history, promises and hope we find in the ancient scriptures, the Gospels and Paul's letters. The weeks of preparation engage us in reflection and renew our hope in God for the future of God's new creation. This lesson of hope is designed to introduce learners to the Advent season through the prophet Isaiah and selected visual images.

We live in a time filled with the images of ideal holiday celebrations in advertisements, social media, and television, juxtaposed against the images of civil discord, war, poverty and injustice. How can we learn to see, experience and reflect on God's word with a different kind of image, the images gifted to us through the works of artists? How can we find meaning in scripture through art and in turn the multitude of images around us each day?

This Advent study will engage learners in a new way of seeing and interpreting scripture through paintings, sculpture and photography. The study will encourage participants to view the images from a critical perspective; to use the images in support of the lesson's objectives and provide an opportunity for personal and community reflection. The purpose of the study is to bring new understanding and insight to the season of Advent as we wait with hope and promise for the coming of the Christ child. In the symbolism of the visual, we hope to experience the Word and find a means to the spiritual.

#### **Intended Learners**

The study is intended for adult learners and can be implemented by pastors or lay teachers. The ideal setting is a small group of twelve participants within a congregation. The lessons are 90 minutes in length and suited for a weekday or evening class.

#### **Rationale**

Karen Stone writes in *Image and Spirit: Finding Meaning in Visual Art* (2003), "Meaningful symbols are needed to involve us as integral and spiritual beings, and that enables us to reenact meaning in our own lives." Throughout scripture, we find references to the symbolism and metaphors of visual images. There are numerous biblical references supporting the celebration

of beauty and goodness in God's created order beginning with creation itself (Genesis 1:31) and continuing throughout the Old and New Testaments. Examples include the beauty and the God gifted talents of Bezalel and Oholiab in the building of the temple (Exodus 31:1-11) to the visual images of the cross, Pentecost and the entire book of Revelation. In our congregations we have the symbolism of the table and chalice in the Lord's Supper and the baptismal font for the celebration of a new life in Christ. With these symbols in our history and practice, further study of art's place in our spiritual lives can help us connect with the world and each other. Scripture presents verbal images that lend themselves to visual interpretation. Art gives us the tools to awaken our senses to the presence of God. It is a way in which the Spirit calls us to the mystery of the spiritual and transcendent.

### **Pedagogy**

We all learn by different methods. Some of us are visual, others linguistic. Based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences or the capacity to process information, I have attempted to engage the following throughout this study; 1) spatial - in the use of art prints for reflection and interpretation, 2) linguistic - in the reading of scripture and telling of personal impressions, 3) interpersonal - in the opportunity to share and respond to others' comments and 4) intrapersonal - in the opportunity for personal reflection (MI Oasis n.d).

Using art presents its own challenges as well as opportunities. Three elements are necessary for art's successful use in teaching. These elements form the basis for the teaching method. First, the opportunity to engage the visual image from a critical perspective. Train the participant to look with discernment, to actively see. Discuss the possible meanings of the lines, colors, shapes and forms. Present the historical knowledge of the artist or era to enhance one's understanding when appropriate. The second element is the visual image's support of the objective of the lesson. Read the image as it relates to the scripture. What parts of the text does the image capture and what parts does it seem to ignore? The third element is an opportunity for personal and community reflection in which the individual is engaged in a meditative process followed by the opportunity to learn from each other in community.

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**Session Title:** *The View from the Mountain*

**Bible Passage:** **Isaiah 2:1-5**

**Objectives:** The objectives of the lesson are 1) to learn to identify and engage in the visual components of an artwork by learning skills in description, analyses and interpretation, 2) to place the artwork in conversation with the Isaiah text and 3) to share the findings in community with each other.

**Outcome:** Participants will be able to *begin* to see and find new meaning in God's word through the visual/spatial interpretations as well as the linguistic. Participants will gain an understanding that the promises of hope in the Advent season begin with the sovereignty of God and God's faithfulness.

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**A note concerning art, photo and sculpture resources for class use.** The Internet is an excellent source for art, photography and sculpture; however, do not print copyrighted art without permission. The suggested art in the lesson can be found on two copyright free websites, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MetArt) at [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), The National Gallery of Art (NGA) at <https://images.nga.gov/>, or through a google/images search or the specified web link. Use the search box on each site to locate the images.

**Materials and Preparation:** A table large enough for all participants. Advent wreath, candles, matches, note paper, pencils, , access to the internet and screen or monitor. Handouts printed with Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122 (NRSV).

For the "Seeing" exercises, prepare a flip chart page with the following list: *What do you see? Lines, Shapes, Light, Colors, Images, Central Focus, Faith Themes, Feelings, Metaphors*. Post the chart for all to see.

For the Group Seeing Exercise, one large print or art in digital format for screen or monitor projection. Art print suggestion: *Woman Digging in Orchard*, Camille Pissaro (google/images).

For the Individual Seeing Exercise introduction: *The Annunciation* by Luca Giordano (ArtMet).

For the Individual Seeing Exercise, print at least four different prints with enough copies for each person to have one of the four. Art print suggestions: Photo of *Swords Into Plowshares*, United Nations sculpture (google/images); *Poling the Marsh Hay*, Peter Henry Emerson (MetArt); *Simpson Pass*, John Singer Sargent (NGA); *Extreme Recycle*, Khalil Rabah (<http://levantium.com/2011/06/05/extreme-recycle/>).

## **Opening**

**Time: 15 min**

### **Activity: Introductions and opening**

- **Introductions**

Welcome everyone. Ask Participants to introduce themselves and share a memory or reflection from previous Advent seasons.

- **The Advent Season**

*Reinforce what has been shared and give a brief overview:* Advent, which means "coming," is the beginning of the church year. Advent is followed by Christmas, Pentecost, Lent, and Easter among others significant days for remembrance and celebration. Advent begins the four Sundays before Christmas and concludes with Jesus' birth. It is a season of preparation for Christ's coming, a time when Christians ready themselves for the coming of the Messiah at Christmas, and also his return as Judge and Redeemer at the second coming.

- **Lighting of the Advent candle**

*Share the following:* We will use an Advent wreath for several reasons. One, it is a tradition that focuses each of the four weeks on one of the four virtues Jesus brings us: Hope, Love, Peace and Joy. In this introduction to Advent, we will focus on the candle of Hope. The light of the candle reminds us of God's presence through the Holy Spirit.

*Light the first candle.*

- **Prayer**

*Use this following prayer or offer one of your own.*

Let us pray. So many in your world, gracious God, have lost hope or placed their hope in false promises. So many lose sight of your presence among us. We pray that you will be Emmanuel, God with us, so during this season of Advent, we may know where you are already present.

Teach us to see the creative power of Hope in new ways. Help us live in your hope so we may

be your creative spirit in the world. We pray in the name of the one whose coming, Jesus Christ. Amen.

- **Objectives**

*Share the following:* During this class, we are going to explore how visual images help us understand and perhaps find new meaning in scripture. Robin Jensen, in her book, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith and the Christian Community* tells us "As observers, when we turn toward the beautiful object and recognize that its beauty is partly a revelation of the divine, we respond with gratitude as well as delight. The inspiration is a gift of the Spirit, and we are meant to attend to it." In our effort to attend to the spirit through art and scripture, we have three objectives. The first is learning to see. God has gifted the artist with a certain talent to express beauty, justice, emotion, to tell a story. As a viewer of art, can we experience art beyond our first impressions such as "Gee, those colors would look great in my living room." or "That's art?" or "My three year old could paint that!" So our first objective is to begin to learn how to see beyond our first impressions. Our second objective is to discover if art can help us interpret scripture. Can we find evidence of God's word in the visual? And if so, what does it say to us, what does it say within us? What response does it elicit from us? Our third objective is to learn from each other in community by sharing our observations and insights.

### **Seeing - Group Artwork Exercise**

**Time: 30 min**

**Activity: Describe and analyze a singular work of art.**

*Participants will brainstorm responses to a series of questions followed by discussion. Display a digital version of Woman Digging in Orchard on the screen or monitor. Ask the class to spend a few moments in silence looking at the painting. Then proceed to ask one or more of the "Seeing" questions from each category. Ask enough questions to engage all aspects of the work and participation from as many as possible.*

- **Description Seeing Questions**

#### General

Describe everything you see.

#### Lines

What kind of lines do you see?

What lines draw your attention?

## Shape

What shapes do you see?

Are there shapes that are repeated?

Is there a central image or shape? What is it?

## Light

Is the artwork light, dark or in-between?

Where does the source of light come from?

## Color

What are the colors the artist used?

Are they bright, neutral, intense, harmonious?

## Images

Is there a central image or shape?

What are the people doing?

Are they rich, poor, powerful, weak, interesting?

### • **Analysis Seeing Questions**

*Analysis questions take the viewer beyond the painting itself and into personal reflection and interpretation. Again, it is not necessary to ask all the questions. Give everyone a chance to respond and allow for reflection and discussion. Share your own reflections to encourage the group.*

Is your eye drawn to a particular place, color, or shape?

What feelings does the painting give you?

Are there visual metaphors in the picture?

Do you see themes of faith in the artwork?

Do you have knowledge or experience that connects you to this art work?

What meanings might the artist have intended?

*Ask someone to weave a story about the painting.*

How did our descriptions change your first impression of the work?

## **Seeing and Interpreting - Individual Artwork Exercise**

**Time: 30 min**

**Activity: Interpretation of scripture in relation to the art prints.**

*Have a digital version of The Annunciation by Luca Giordano (ArtMet) ready to display on the monitor or screen.*

- **Introduction**

*Share the following:* Much of scripture is narrative, it tells a story. Art is the same. If we take the time to really see the work, we will find a story. There are two approaches to using art as a way of understanding scripture. The first is when the artist uses the scripture to tell the story by illustrating the people and action in a painting. There are numerous examples of paintings that tell a story such as *The Annunciation* by Luca Giordano. The second way of interpreting scripture is to seek God's word in what is *not* so obvious. We certainly have more opportunity for this method than we do for the first. We are surrounded by visual images in advertising, movies and television. To get us started in this new way of seeing, I've chosen prints that are perhaps a little bit of both, some more realistic in the story telling and some more symbolic.

- **Individual Print Reflection**

*Pass out the prints for participants. Ask them to silently describe and analyze their print using the same questions used in the group exercise. You can refer to the areas of seeing on the flip chart. After 3-5 minutes, ask them to turn the prints over, face side down.*

- **Interpreting Art and Scripture**

*Prepare to read Isaiah 2:1-5. Ask the group to share what they know about Isaiah, the prophet. Share the following background information as needed with the group.*

First Isaiah is attributed to the prophet bearing the name, Isaiah of Jerusalem. He lived in the second half of the 8th Century. Isaiah wrote during the Syro-Ephaimite War. The Kingdom of Judah under King Ahaz was being threatened by a coalition between the Kings of Israel and Aram who were trying to break away from the Kingdom of Assyria. Isaiah had access to King Ahaz and lived on the inside of the central institutions of Judah. Isaiah follows a tradition of oral prophecy that goes back to the time of King David. Within the context of existing laws, Isaiah wrote as a prophet to the kings emphasizing the only true alliance is one with God.

Written as prophetic literature in poetic form, the prophet speaks the word of the Lord concerning the future. Jerusalem and Mt. Zion, as ancient tradition dictates, are the geographical and historical center of this scripture passage. It is this context that we approach the scripture.

- **Isaiah 2:1-5 Interpretation and Discussion**

*Ask a participant to read the scripture while the class follows on the handouts.*

Discussion Questions:

*Use the following key themes as needed during the discussion: The mountain is a metaphor for God's authority and providence. For those who follow and learn, God will judge all the nations and arbitrate for the people. Hope lies in the day when God will be recognized among all the nations as judge and peacemaker. The people will respond by trusting in God and destroying their weapons and caring for the bounty God has given them, to care for one another and abandon war. Isaiah presents an entreaty to come and walk with the Lord.*

What struck you as important as we read the scripture?

What visual images did you hear?

What do you think God is saying through Isaiah to the people of Judah?

What does this passage say about who God is?

How do we see *God's* future in this passage?

Where and how do we find hope in Isaiah's words?

- **Isaiah 2:1-5 Interpretation and Discussion with Art Prints**

*Read Isaiah 2:1-5 again and this time ask the participants to focus on their art prints.*

Discussion Questions:

Can you relate your print in any way to Isaiah's message?

What particular themes of faith do you see?

Where can we see signs of God's hope today?

Does the artwork increase your understanding? In what way?

## **Concluding**

**Time: 10 min**

**Activity: Concluding remarks and prayer**

*In concluding, tie together comments from the class discussion. Use the following as needed to reinforce the Advent message.*

During this season of preparation, Isaiah reminds us of God's sovereignty and promise. We too are called to the mountain to praise God, to learn, and to be the plowshares and pruning hooks. Through faith we can hope for God's presence for judgment and reconciliation. We can renew our faith in the hope to come in the birth of Christ. We are a world in need of light. We can walk in that light now, one step at a time. How will we respond?

- **Closing Prayer**

Let us pray Psalm 122 responsively

Amen!

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### **Teaching Evaluation**

(Distributed by email.)

*Please respond briefly to the questions below. Please save your responses and return the document to (email address). Since we are doing the evaluation by email, they won't be anonymous. Please don't let that fact inhibit your comments. This is a learning opportunity for the teacher.*

1. Identify three strengths of the presentation.
2. Was this a successful teaching/learning session? Why/why not?
3. Were subject matter/content and class materials appropriate for you?
4. Describe the use of Biblical resources in this session. How was the Bible interpreted and how did this affect the teaching/learning?
5. Describe the use of the visual images in this session. How did this affect the teaching/learning?
6. Why were teaching strategies effective or ineffective? Please explain.
7. What did you learn?

*Thank you!*

## Sources Cited and Consulted

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